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ABSTRACT

For a project, a university researcher and a group of education graduate students in literacy and language education at Purdue University exchanged e-mail with 32 third graders in two classes at a northern California elementary school. The overall aim of the project was to build the children's literacy and communication skills by involving them in scaffolded written discussions with a more capable writer. An additional pedagogical aim was to help the children explore the content knowledge they were acquiring in their classroom, thus extending their ability to write about this official curriculum through collaborative discussions with adult writers. During the first year of the project the primary research questions were: (1) What is the nature of written response for these children? and (2) What sorts of patterns emerge in the types of questions that the children originate for the researchers? Although the researchers tried to explore the curricular topics, children in one group began to preface their letters with riddles, and riddling extended to two of the writing groups. The riddlers also began to structure dialogues in which they designated both a topic and a method of exchange that would assure a return for their riddles. It could be said that riddling dealt with child-centered topics in which the children maintained interest because the riddles were: (1) fun; (2) child-initiated; (3) interesting to the children; or (4) generally part of children's culture. However, such a reductive analysis would give short shrift to something that the children maintained for 4 months. They opposed another discourse--the curricular discourse the researchers had initiated--by controlling it. (Contains 3 tables and 25 references.) (NKA)

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Riddle Me This, Riddle Me That: Email Dialogues With Third-Grade Writers

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Riddle Me This, Riddle Me That:
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Introduction

For this project, a university researcher and a group of education graduate students literacy and language education at Purdue University exchanged electronic mail with the 32 third-grade children in two successive classes at a Northern California elementary school; that is, we compiled the child-adult e-mail correspondence that took place once weekly from September through April of two academic years. Each researcher corresponded with groups of five children via e-mail.

The researchers thought that the overall aim of the project was to build the children's literacy and communication skills by involving them in scaffolded written discussions with a more capable writer. We thought that an additional pedagogically productive aim would be to help the children explore the content knowledge they were acquiring in their classroom, thus extending their ability to write about this official curriculum through collaborative discussions with adult writers.

This presentation will focus on Year 1 of the project, during which the primary research questions were:

- What is the nature of written response for these children? Will the children only respond to what we write (or to something else)?
- What sorts of patterns emerge in the types of questions that the children originate for us (e.g., structural, [formal], functional [discourse], conceptual [topic])?

Perspective

The theoretical intention of this presentation is to portray the children's writing as a medium for participation in social response to an audience--a situation in which children are "active contributors" to evolving written dialogues (Dyson, 1997, p. 6). Much of the literature focusing on children's uses of telecommunications in the classroom has been confined to examinations of the technical aspects of both children's and teachers' development of word-processing skills (e.g., Honey, 1993; Cotton, 1996), classroom uses of the Internet to access information (Caudell, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Ross, 1995), or curriculum development projects that simulate environments, activities and artifacts to induce so-called collaborative and constructive work on the part of the children (Riel, 1990; McGlinn, 1991; Bruce & Rubin, 1993; Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Bellamy, 1996). Descriptions of classroom writing situations integrating computer use with child-initiated literacy products have tended to emphasize the development of familiarity with the computer as a mechanical tool and not as a tool for the interpersonal function of written language by young children (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Cochran-Smith, Paris & Kahn, 1991). The literature describing children's non-electronic letter-writing does address issues of dialogue construction along with the purposes and scope of children's writing (e.g., Hall, Robinson & Crawford, 1990; Hall & Robinson, 1994). Although Hall (2000) points out that interactive writing introduces child writers to the needs of readers, few researchers have looked at uses of telecommunications that enable

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child writers to experiment with audience perception through dialogue construction (e.g., Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Barbules, 1993; Raeithel & Velichkovsky, 1996; Hall, Crawford & Robinson, 1997).

Method

"Here I was in a classroom with 32 third-grade students and one computer," the teacher wrote. "What next?" Because keyboarding was still an unacquired skill for most of the children, we did not want mechanical frustration to interfere with content composition. In any case, the use of a single computer to teach keyboarding to 32 children was impracticable. Students hand-wrote a response on paper, stapled the computer E-pal letter to the hand-written letter, and placed the portfolio in the designated spot. The hand-written letters were keyed-in by two parent volunteers and e-mailed to each e-pal. When the students receive their e-pal letters, they read two letters: the top letter was the previous week's hand-written letter, now in computer print. The second letter was the e-pal's response.

Despite the use of paper to write the letters, the children had grown up with technology and were very much aware of the immediacy of e-mail. The classroom teacher reported that they would watch the classroom computer as their messages traveled 2,000 miles: "It gets there in *seconds*!" they consistently noted. In addition, individual children could compose "quick notes" to their e-Pals during free moments when other classroom work had been finished. These quick notes were keyed-in by the children themselves and received a response the same day from the adult e-Pal, thus increasing the accessibility and rapidity of communication. Focus emerged from the knowledge that the adults would immediately receive and respond to the letters: we would be in the same moment as they were.

Each student kept the weekly letters in an individual portfolio. The students were free to look back in their portfolios for information or to refresh their memories about a previous conversation their e-pal. The teacher was able to use this as an assessment tool to track the progress made by each student in writing and in content comprehension. He reviewed the e-pal letters weekly to follow the children's progress in the mechanics of writing. As the weeks progressed, he could see, for example, that last week's lesson presented on a particular "grammar" rule was carried over into daily writing. If the students choose to discuss a content area with their E-pals, the teacher could see the progress in comprehension and how the student's writing was beginning to take focus.

The researchers met on a weekly basis to develop and refine data analysis categories and apply them to the collected data. This assured inter-rater reliability. In addition, these results were sent to the classroom teacher, who also received an e-mail account of the issues arising in the weekly researcher conferences. The teacher and researchers also exchanged evaluations of the children's development in writing. The researchers received weekly reports from the teacher about the curriculum plans for all areas of classroom work for the week, and outcomes from the previous week's work in the classroom. Both the classroom teacher and the researchers kept e-mail logs to follow the children's development as writers and to compile methodological notes for conducting classroom activity. The researchers and the classroom teacher also conducted an ongoing e-mail dialogue to examine patterns in their appraisals of the

children's written and social response to their interlocutors and to trace and maintain the ongoing development of the project.

A process of qualitative analysis was used to clarify patterns of activity in the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982) which would lead to the "comprehensive description and interpretation of meaning" of the children's e-mail letters (Genishi, 1982, p. 584). Within and across-case data analysis examined variations in the nature of the child and adult e-mail letters across participants, within each participant case and across time. The unit of analysis was the "e-mail exchange." An e-mail exchange included the initiating child letter and all further adult-child letter exchanges that maintained a continuous topical focus. The critical parts of an e-mail exchange were then compared in order to derive coding categories that described the variation between units. The coding categories included: (a) the language functions used (as shown in Table 1), (b) the presentation styles that characterized and organized the letters (as shown in Table 2), and (c) the tone or attitude conveyed through written language (as shown in Table 3). This set of components was applied to the data in order to describe the nature of the writing across the group of children.

Findings

From the beginning of the school year, the central issue for the adult writers was a lack of focus, or topic-hopping, in the children's writing. In our research seminars, many of the adult writers felt there was little predictability in the children's selection of topics for response; the children often introduced new topics, suddenly dropping a previous line of conversation, the adults' letters had become quite long, introducing many topics as a menu from which the children could choose to respond. In response, the children's letters lengthened, but judging from the responses we received from the children, the function of our questioning was clearly not inquiry. Instead, the conversations had become interviews to which the some of the children responded using a list-making strategy that helped them sort out the smorgasbord of topics we questioned, as in this letter from November:

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1.  Yes!  I like too.
2.  No, I don't no?  I'm 9 years old.
3.  Yes!  It was a graterner snake.
4.  spase, it is grat.
P.S. What fly with out wings ??????????
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The adult writers asked the same question again and again in the weekly seminars: how could we construct letters that would lead the children away from jumping from topic to topic in order to answer our questions? Why did they ignore some of those questions. How could we help them to make choices about what to write so they could direct the letters themselves, leading to a coherent piece...a flow? We were missing the point that the children had already shown us in their letters: they were much more aware than we that what we were engaged in was a conversation, not a cloze test. The children were choosing, but not as we had expected.

The adult writers wanted to focus more on using e-mail to explore the curricular topics the children were working on. In November of Year 1, the teacher began his "geology" unit by digging small holes, 8"x10" on playground. The children were to

illustrate what they found in the holes. The next week, the adult writers began asking the children about the experience. The children overwhelmingly responded with lists:

> I found three worms one leaf, a big root, clay and a slug it was fun going out side when we are supost to be inside the classroom doing class work.

Although we continued to try and explore the topic, the children in one group began to preface their letters with riddles based on The Riddler in Batman Forever. The riddles began with, "Riddle me this, riddle me that." Of the seven riddles uttered by The Riddler in the film, only the last used this mirror phrase (Burton, MacGregor-Scott & Schumacher, 1995), but it was a catchy transition. It unmistakably managed the conversation away from the curricular topic, but each week, each child's letter would stubbornly contain an answer to my previous week's riddle as well as a new riddle for me. The children simply wouldn't let them go. The riddles continued to appear in their letters for four months--from early November through mid-March. The classroom teacher did not encourage or contribute to the riddling process apart from asking the class to help one child with a riddle at one point; neither did the teacher discourage the riddling.

Riddling extended to two of the writing groups; eight of the children were prolific riddlers that year, transmitting one to two riddles per letter. Children in other groups sporadically used riddles, but carried it on primarily as a verbal routine in the classroom. The content and origin of the written riddles changed over time; however, none of the children's later riddles were taken from the film. One group initiated a series of solar system riddles based on the solar system unit that they were doing. In this sense, what the child writers had chosen was an ongoing event structure, a ritual that reversed the power exchange: they could test the adults. They could stump us. They could notify us when we came up with the right answers and select clues to give us when we needed them. Allen even gave me a time limit for the "big riddle" he had worked for two weeks.

> Allen (January)
> Let's talk about riddles. I have a nother riddle riddle this riddle that ifyou look on my face you wont see 13 any place. Jim cary played on that movie he made lots of riddles. How about we wrte one every time. That would be nice. Did you know that alot of riddles rime. And alot of riddles don't rime. I have been thinking of a big riddle at my house you will never guess it. I have not thought of the hole thing. but I will get one when I get home. So do you like riddles I do. I like giving people a riddle.

The riddlers also began to structure dialogues in which they designated both a topic and a method of exchange that would assure a return for their riddles. Some of the

children created original riddles that drew on the germs and viruses unit that the class was doing; for example:

> Allen (February)
> I will give you the big riddle now. It grows on food, it don't need a seed it don't need sun. And it's lots of fun. it could be white or green. And were studying it in class. And it don't grow fast it grows very slow. I will give you until you write back. That was the hard part. Because I only gave you until you write back.

The riddle was largely accurate; mold grows from spores, not seeds, although it can be any color. The definition of quick versus slow-growing was all relative. The children had created the ritual of the riddle and had invited us to engage; when we did, the tone became playfully conspiratorial, testing. This was play embedded in dialogue. Some children began to engage us with riddles as a game but, on the other hand, the development of the riddling discourse suggested something more. Riddling provided a forum for using language in more interactively powerful ways than did informational, curricular questions.

Conclusions

Of what value was riddling then? One could say that these were child-centered topics in which the children maintained interest because they were (a) fun, (b) child-initiated, (c) interesting to the children, or (d) generally part of children's culture. Such a reductive analysis would, however, give short shrift to something that the children maintained for four months. These child writers took up and maintained "discourse-defined positions...standpoints taken up by the discourse in its relation to other, ultimately opposing, discourses" (Gee, 1989, p. 19). From these standpoints, the riddlers managed an adult writer by appropriating the power that came from holding an answer that another lacked. In this sense, they opposed another discourse—the curricular discourse that we had initiated—by controlling it. They engaged in a conversation in which they wielded considerable power and control, central to participation in written discourse (Gee, 1989). The children thus made writing performative, using each letter as a social act, and recalibrating the curricular-interpersonal balance of the writing exchanges.

As the children established ownership in the conversations, the adult writers learned that we could not dictate the nature of the children's writing, especially in very open e-mail dialogues. Because the child writers assume parity, they had the power to choose a response. This led the teacher and researchers developed a wider notion of "curriculum," interweaving classroom content issues and the individual experiences, imaginations, and curiosities of the children. As a result, the children's letters lengthened and included more details as their relationships with the adult writers became more comfortable. Their spelling even got better because they noticed that our spellings were different. The children had little energy for using the electronic exchange

to transmit obvious facts (Todorov, 1996). For the children, concrete and manipulative activities like looking in a hole in the ground happened in the moment and were then finished. The curriculum had set the goal. If geology was useful for anything, it was to show the adult writers which responses the children did choose. Those should have shown us how to respond. We were slow learners!

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Table 1
Language Functions

E-MAIL LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS	WHAT WRITTEN LANGUAGE IS USED FOR
To inform (objective)	Language is used to make observations and/or references to people, objects, processes, or qualities of the world.
To inform (subjective)	Language is used to make references to the self or to give information about the self or one's relationships/social life, which are conventionally shared with others.
To query	Language is used to make personal or heuristic inquiries of the interlocutor.
To disclose personal information	Language is used to give selected information about self or relationships that is not conventionally shared with others.
To evaluate	Language is used to differentiate the self, to integrate an idea into the ongoing dialogue, or to compare an idea with the interlocutor's idea in the ongoing dialogue.
To manage	Language is used to advise, to regulate the interlocutor's behavior, to challenge the interlocutor, or to regulate the dialogue.
To carry on small talk	Language is used to maintain a social interaction via verbal ritual with little content contribution.
To imagine	Language is used to create his or her own world apart from the observable, or objective, world of the present.

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Table 2
Presentation Styles

PRESENTATION STYLES	HOW INFORMATION IS PRESENTED
Procedural	Information is presented or questions are presented operationally through a recount of a sequence of actions.
Encyclopedic	Information is presented or questions are presented through a restatement of content from an outside source (other than the child) without interpretation or logical reasoning by the writer.
Experiential	Information is presented or questions are presented through the description of observation and/or data-gathering investigation(s) carried out by the writer.
Interpretive	Information is presented by giving or questioning meaning not immediately apparent among sets of empirical data gathered through physical activity or reading. Interpretation leads to the construction of inferences, predictions, hypotheses and/or explanations.
Logical	Information is presented or questions are presented inductively or deductively through a description of patterns that gives order to the available data.
Projecting	Information is presented or questions are presented by attributing (a) feelings or intentions to others, (b) possibilities to a situation, or (c) implications to a scene--either imaginative or real.
Transitional	Information is presented or questions are presented by mentioning one or more topics without a depth of exploration in order to preface, set up, or provide transitions within the conversation.

Table 3
Tones of Voice for E-mail

TONES (developed by Priya Mathew-Johnson)	HOW WRITTEN LANGUAGE CONVEYS ATTITUDES OR FEELINGS
Accusing	Makes a demand for an explanation
Announcing	Attempts to control the direction of the conversation by announcing what is about to come up next
Complaining	Expresses frustration, whines, or expresses vehement dislike
Complimentary	Compliments, praises, or flatters the interlocutor in a way that attempts to cement the relationship
Conspiratorial	Creates a mutual, but exclusive, context with you through the use of information considered to be secret
Emphatic	Offers information in an imperative manner to control your behavior in the immediate future
Inviting	Prompts you to give information about yourself in a way that encourages dialogue and mutuality
Matter-of-Fact	Observes without personal comment
Playful	Jokes; teases; mimics
Speculative	Speculates about the world in such a way that it invites feedback
Rhetorical	Indicates that no debate is expected: the writer is the authority on the topic.
Terminating	Indicates that the line of inquiry is being terminated
Testing	Embellishes and/or exaggerates in order to test the receiver's gullibility
Wistful	Indicates an unfulfilled need that the other writer cannot fulfill.

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